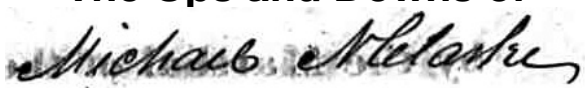
The Ups and Downs of



Michael N. Clarke, as he is most often named, was born Michael Clarke on 05 Apr 1798 in Hammersmith, Middlesex, England to William (b. 1774) and Martha Clarke. He was christened in Fulham Parish on 06 Oct 1799. Little is known of his early childhood, but his younger siblings are easily found in the christening records:

- Monoah*, born 06 Aug 1799
- Jemima*, born 02 Jan 1801
- Joshua, born 22 Mar 1802 (died Oct 1802)
- Joshua, born May 1803 (died Sep 1803)

* Mentioned in Michael's correspondence with family.

A second sister named Miriem (Miriam) is also mentioned in several letters written by Michael to his father.

The next we see of Michael is in a letter he is writing home to his parents on 29 Aug 1810. Note that he is 12 years old. He is informing his parents that on 01 Aug he had accepted an apprenticeship at sea for a term of six years. He is initially headed for Cadiz in Spain and then on to Gibraltar. He is unsure when he will return; it could be 8 or 9 months or it could be 4 to 5 years.

This is quite stunning. An apparently very troubled or frustrated child has run away from home and gone to sea and was taken into service by people who certainly should have known better. I think this latter point is illustrated by the fact that by Christmas Eve, 1812, Michael is living in America, seemingly no longer an apprentice at sea. Although he never explains the sequence of events that happened to him ("I have seen a great many ups and downs since I left England but thank God I have escaped them all"), it is likely that he was able to escape from the six-year contract given that it was begun when he was only 12 years old and anything but a consenting adult. How he made it across the Atlantic Ocean in the intervening two years and entered the United States during a time of war is not known.

It is amazing that Michael has apparently immigrated to and is living in America on his own at the age of 14. But, by 1817, he is very settled and very happy with America and its stark differences with England. In a letter to his uncle Thomas Clarke (of Mash Gibbon, Buckingham Shire, England) on 14 Jan 1817, he praises the freedom he experiences in America compared to what he had known in England, and he already expects to live out his days in America. He encourages his uncle and all of his family to come to America repeatedly in his correspondences.

> "[I] am now in a Land of Liberty where I wish you all was, where a man can speak his sentiments without reserve, where you can do what you please within the bonds of reason, where there is no tax, no parliament run to make Laws to tax people, to cheat and defraud you out of what you earn, to hold them up in pomp and splendor. No, Dear Sir, there is none of that here. Every individual is free to go where he pleases and when he pleases, no man to control him. What he gets, he keeps. He has not to give to no king but do just what he pleases with it. Ah, Dear Uncle, this is a fine country and delightful place." (14 Jan 1817)

At this point Michael states he is living in Richmond County, Georgia. He has learned the trade of bricklaying and is obviously able to support himself and his new family for he had married Tabitha Bloxsem on 29 Aug 1816 in Richmond County. They would ultimately have at least two children:

- Eloisa Ann (b. 23 Mar 1818, d. 16 May 1890, m. Daniel F. Clarke in 1836)
- Joseph Michael, (b. 28 Jun 1821, d. 25 Jan 1882, m. Mary Elizabeth Dyer in 1850)

As explained below, it appears Tabitha died by 1823 and Michael never mentions other children in his letters, so it is likely these are the only children of Michael and Tabitha.

The birth of Eloisa is recorded in a letter from Michael to his father on 01 Apr 1818. She was born at 11:00 PM on 23 Mar 1818. In this letter Michael also expresses regret for "being a bad boy" as a child at home. It is a sporadic but consistent theme in his letters home: Michael definitely expresses regret and suffering for the trials he has been through and the trouble he has caused his family. Even in his very first letter home to his uncle he appeared to have difficulty even being able to write such a letter: "I have made several efforts since I left England to write but I could not for my resolution failed, but I shall try and finish this time if it lays in my power." (14 Jan 1817) It would seem his experience of running away from home and his escape from what appeared to be servitude has significantly changed him and caused him to reflect on his life and those who love him, despite the end result being something that he seems to truly appreciate: living free in America with a family and a good livelihood.

> "Your letter, my Dear Father, cheered the heart and soul of your long lost undutiful son. But why say undutiful son, rather say ungrateful, for to leave the best of fathers and kindred for to satisfy a misguided passion or rather a desire to go sea... But, my Dear Father, I hope you will pardon all my mistakes and past offenses for my mind is very much perplexed." (13 Jul 1817)

As an interesting aside, in our modern day of scrupulous record-keeping it is hard to imagine a person not knowing their age or birthday. But, this was the case for Michael in 1817: "Dear Father, be so good as to write to me my age as I am not confident of it and write to me the height of my brother as I want to know how much he has outgrown me as I am only 5 feet 7 inches high." (20 Oct 1817) This also gives us a small glimpse into Michael's appearance: he is 5' 7" tall. His family must have informed him of his birthday since the date on his grave marker matches the christening record in England.

In this time period, Michael alters his name. In his 01 Apr 1818 letter to his father, Michael says, "I have added to my name Nathaniel since I left you and I sign my name now Michael N. Clarke." While it was likely done for practical reasons as there was another Michael Clarke living near him, now 20 years old, he appears to have largely finalized his identity.

In multiple letters, Michael asks his family to come to America for a visit or even permanently. The most serious of these efforts appeared to be with his brother Manoah. It is not known if any of his siblings ever came to America permanently, but it does not appear so.

In 1820, while living in Richmond County, Georgia, Michael drew 490 acres in Irwin County, Georgia, district 13, #41, in a land lottery. For some reason, Michael is not to be found in the 1820 United States census.

At this point, there is a distinct shift in Michael's life. Unfortunately, we are going to need to start reading between the lines at times to hypothesize what all occurred.

First, and this is one of the key places where we are reading between the lines, there is a marked shift in Michael's letter written to his father on 02 Jul 1823. He is separated from his children ("I have just come from the country where my dear little children live."). He is alone since he says to his father, "Write as soon as possible as I have no one to cheer me now till I see you but your letters." In most other letters his wife is mentioned, even by name as Tabitha or Mrs. Clarke, but in this letter she is nowhere to be found. And, Michael's is concerned for his children if he were to die, but no mention is made of concern for his wife.

From this and what appear to be subsequent events in Michael's life, Tabitha likely died between the birth of their son in Jun 1821 and the time of this letter, Jul 1823. The first "subsequent event" is Michael's marriage to Millissa (Melissa) Henton on 17 Mar 1825 in Clarke County, Georgia. But, Clarke County? Is this the same Michael N. Clarke?

Yes, it is. Within 5 months of this marriage, we find Michael in prison in Clarke County for not being able to pay back a loan to I. (or A.) Erwin. We know this is Michael because his means of getting out of prison is the apparent sale or transfer of 490 acres of land that he owns in the 13th district of Irwin County, Georgia, #41. This is the land Michael drew in the land lottery of 1820 which confirms that Michael has moved from Richmond to Clarke county.

Interestingly, this 490 acre tract was scheduled to be sold by the Richmond County tax collector on 02 Mar 1824 to satisfy unpaid county and state taxes for 1821 and 1822 in the amount of $1.875. Apparently the sale did not occur for some reason. Perhaps Michael paid the taxes before the auction occurred.

As an aside, given what Michael is now experiencing, one has to wonder if his early sentiments about America in the letter to his uncle have changed. For all of its benefits over England, "the tax man cometh" in America as well. Michael appears to have flaunted this obligation for a time, knowingly or unknowingly.

Michael did not remain in Clarke County too long (5 years or less) as we possibly see him in Monroe County in 1830 and Columbus shortly thereafter.

Next on the agenda is a troublesome 1830 United States Census record in Monroe County, Georgia, for a Michael N. Clarke. It is obvious that daughter Eloisa and son Joseph are not indicated in the record, which brings into question whether this is actually Michael (maybe he is still separated from his children from his first marriage?). An additional question arises as this census record was probably taken mid-year (the official census date was 01 Jun), but son Walter (see below) was reportedly born in Columbus (Muscogee County) in March. So, it seems that either this is not Michael in the 1830 census or perhaps Walter was actually born in Monroe County or even Athens (Clarke County).

If this census record is indeed for Michael, it shows that he and his second wife have apparently had 3 children, two boys and a girl, all under the age of 5. This makes sense as they have only been married 5 years. And, it largely fits with other apparent Clarke descendants...

When Michael dies in 1858, a Walter S. Clarke is seen applying for letters of administration on the estate along with known son Jack D. Clarke. This means that he is almost certainly also a son of Michael. This Walter Scott Clarke is mentioned as a brother in the obituary of Anne M. Clarke Diggars. This would account for two of the three children of Michael and Millissi implied by the 1830 census, if indeed it is our Michael:

- Anne M. (b. 26 Jan 1826 Athens, GA, d. 25 Jan 1917 Macon, GA, m. Daniel T. Driggars 04 Mar 1856 Bibb County, GA)
- Walter Scott (b. 12 Mar 1830 Columbus, GA, d. 08 Jun 1898 Macon, GA)

As evidenced by Walter's birthplace, by 1830 Michael had moved even further west to Columbus, Muscogee, Georgia, and tragedy apparently strikes again before 1832. The first significant mention of him is a wedding announcement. Capt. Michael N. Clarke married Pamela A. Hale on 17 Aug 1832 in Columbus. Beyond the fact that Millissa has apparently died between 1830 and 1832, Michael now has a rank of Captain. This is the first mention of any kind of military service for Michael, although he is indeed listed as Captain in other Columbus newspaper articles. But, it almost feels like it conflicts with the next significant mention of Michael in Columbus.

On 05 Jun 1835, Michael is appointed Adjutant in the 66th Regiment of the Georgia Militia with a rank of Lieutenant. It is not clear why his rank has been reduced, or to say it another way, it is not clear if he was Captain in the same organization as he is now a part of (the Georgia Militia) or a different organization. Nevertheless, this military service leads to his involvement in the Second Seminole War. Michael is listed as Lieutenant in the Capt. Evans Company, Georgia Volunteers. He received bounty land warrant #58811 for 120 acres (patent issued to assignee Abram B. Matley on 15 Apr 1859, placed in Wisconsin). A second land patent exists that indicates a second bounty land warrant #8804 for 40 acres (patent issued to Michael on 10 Jul 1852, placed in Alabama).

In the following years we find Michael in a couple of public service capacities. In Jan 1837, he is elected by the Columbus City Council as City Clerk and in 1838 he is seen in numerous newspaper articles serving as a Justice of the Peace. These events alone seem to show that Michael had overcome many of the challenges of his earlier life.

In the 1840 United States census Michael is shown as the head of household with 9 other people in household. He is the male 40 to 50 years old. He is actually the census taker in his area. Also inferred in this record are: his wife Pamela (20-30), son Jack (incredibly mis-marked as under 5), daughter Martha (under 5), and son William (under 5). The remaining individuals are likely 3 children from previous marriages (Anne, Walter, perhaps Joseph?) and possibly Pamela's mother, whoever she may be.

In 1845 Michael is issued two shared land patents in Alabama. On 01 Jul 1845, Michael, John L. Lewis, and Pryor Dozier of Muscogee County, Georgia, are issued a patent for 80 acres as tenants in common. On 01 Oct 1845, Michael, Anderson Hunt, and William Brown of Muscogee County, Georgia, are issued a patent for 78 acres as tenants in common.

In the 1850 United States census Michael is listed as M. N. Clark, the head of household with 6 other people, age 53, born in England, $1,200 in real estate. Also shown are his wife Pamela and their 5 children, enumerated below along with a 6th child born after the census.

- Jackson Downing (b. 03 Mar 1833, d. 21 Dec 1892, m. Mary D. Williams 12 Nov 1857)
- Martha R. (b. Abt 1837, m. George A. Kindon 25 Nov 1857)
- William (b. Abt 1839)
- Sarah Jane (b. Abt 1841, m. Duncan Smith 23 Jan 1859)
- Frederick T. (b. Abt 1847)
- Mary Ellen (b. May 1851, d. 27 Aug 1906, m. William V. Bozeman 06 Dec 1865)

Michael died on 25 Sep 1858 at the age of 60 and was buried in Linwood Cemetery in Columbus the following day. He was a member of the Masonic Lodge. His estate is in probate on 08 Feb 1859 in Muscogee County, Georgia. He died intestate with his estate administered by his son Jack.

For all of its ups and downs, the last 25 years of Michael's life appeared to have been quite stable, fruitful, and rewarding. His obituary indicates that he "was a much respected and useful citizen... [who] had served his country well in the Florida War of 1836, as well as in the relations of a peaceful life."

written by Kevin P. Thompson, Apr 2025